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Teacher Retention at a Tribal School

Abstract

This action research project examined teacher retention in an extremely stressful job at a tribal school in northwest Washington. Two groups of teachers participated. The first group was made up of teachers who had been at Lummi Nation School for less than five years and the second group was made up of teachers who had been teaching there for more than ten years. The participants were interviewed about their jobs, uncovering the job stressors that they faced, the job satisfaction that they found, and the reasons they continued in their jobs. Both groups had similar responses regarding job stress and job satisfaction. One notable difference was the priority the first group placed on academic rigor in contrast to the second group's priority of cultural awareness and incorporation. The findings of the study suggest that this difference in priority may have an impact on teacher retention.

Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

Master of Education (MEd)

Department

Graduate Education

First Advisor

Pat Kornelis

Keywords

Master of Education, thesis, teachers, Washington state, tribal citizenship, job stress, job satisfaction, race awareness, academic achievement

Subject Categories

Curriculum and Instruction | Education

Comments

Action Research Project Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

TEACHER RETENTION AT A TRIBAL SCHOOL

by

Cara Mulder

B.A. Dordt College, 2006

Action Research Project Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
May, 2016

Teacher Retention at a Tribal School

by

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Acknowledgements

My middle school students love to ask me what I wanted to be when I was their age. They laugh at me when I tell them that I have wanted to be a teacher ever since I was in middle school. God has given me the gift and the love for teaching; I am thankful for this opportunity to become a stronger teacher and leader. I want to thank my cousin, Professor David Mulder, for his encouragement to pursue this degree at Dordt College. I want to thank Dr. Pat Kornelis for supporting me and praying for me in my endeavors as an undergraduate student, as a graduate student, and as a teacher. My family has been incredibly patient with me not always having the energy or time to participate in different family activities; I am so appreciative of their love, support, and prayers through this journey. My roommate, Carma, has been very supportive and gracious through this process and I hope that I can reciprocate that support. I work with incredible people who gave up time in their busy lives to help me with this project. I would not be able to continue to do the work that I am doing without their support and encouragement. Thank you to the army of people who are praying me through each day. He is good, He is faithful, His love never fails.

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Abstract

This action research project examined teacher retention in an extremely stressful job at a tribal school in northwest Washington. Two groups of teachers participated. The first group was made up of teachers who had been at Lummi Nation School for less than five years and the second group was made up teachers of who had been teaching there for more than ten years. The participants were interviewed about their jobs, uncovering the job stressors that they faced, the job satisfaction that they found, and the reasons they continued in their jobs. Both groups had similar responses regarding job stress and job satisfaction. One notable difference was the priority the first group placed on academic rigor in contrast to the second group's priority of cultural awareness and incorporation. The findings of the study suggest that this difference in priority may have an impact on teacher retention.

A study completed at the end of the 2012-2013 school year determined that eight percent of all public school teachers left the teaching profession while another eight percent of teachers moved to a different school (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014). Eight percent translates into over a quarter of a million teachers leaving the teaching profession and another quarter of a million moving schools in just one year.

There are a variety of reasons why teachers leave their teaching jobs, as the role of a teacher is complex. Teachers not only transmit their expertise in their specific content area, they also teach social and culturally relevant behaviors (Vesely, Saklofske, & Leschied, 2013). The culture in which teachers help shape children intellectually, emotionally and socially is becoming more and more diverse with students presenting a variety of different needs (Oakes, Lane, Jenkins, & Booker, 2013). Most teachers have not received adequate training in managing students with behavioral challenges, which therefore causes a high amount of stress for the teacher (Schaubman, Stetson & Plog, 2011). The high levels of stress that teachers experience is causing many teachers to burn out, which results in teachers leaving their jobs. The reality of teacher burnout has long been recognized and is the top reason that most teachers leave the profession (Brown & Roloff, 2011). The cause for burnout is different for each individual teacher; however, Akbaba (2014) cited the top reasons for teacher burnout are challenges with classroom discipline, isolation, lack of professional support, and lack of personal support.

Teachers who work for schools that are members of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) face a high level of discipline problems. In 2007-2008, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted a study to determine what percentage of teachers felt that student disruptions and misbehaviors interfered with their teaching. Sixty-one percent of BIE teachers felt this to be true while 33% of public school teachers indicated that this was true (Coopersmith,

2009). Classroom discipline is one of the main factors for teachers burning out and leaving their job. A study done in Montana (2008) found that despite higher pay, better facilities, and lower student to teacher ratios, the turnover rate for teachers at schools serving primarily American Indians students was twice the rate of the state average (Erickson, Terhune, & Ruff, 2008).

Lummi Nation School (LNS) is a small, rural, tribal school outside of Bellingham, WA. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reported that in the 2014-2015 school year, 283 students attended LNS. Eighty-three percent of the students received free or reduced price meals and 32% of the students received special education services. Both of these statistics are twice the statewide average (OSPI, 2015). Teachers experience higher levels of stress when working with a population of students that present a variety of needs (Schaubman et al., 2011). Along with serving a high needs population, the LNS teachers also manage discipline matters multiple times a day. Teachers at LNS are paid less than teachers in the local school district. And yet, despite the high demands and lower pay that are present at LNS, half of the general education teachers at the middle and high school level have been teaching at LNS for over ten years.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to discover the factors that lead to teacher retention as illustrated by the LNS teachers with more than ten years at the school. By comparing job stress factors and job satisfaction factors with the teachers who had been at LNS for less than five years, the researcher hoped to identify ways that LNS could better prepared teachers to be successful at the school. Further, the researcher hoped to provide insights to prevent high turnover rates outside the core group that had been at the school for over ten years.

Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, the following definitions will be used. The definitions are the author's own unless otherwise indicated:

American Indian- a member of an indigenous tribe.

Burnout- "Overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001, p. 399).

Job Satisfaction- the level to which teachers feel content or successful in a job.

Job stress- school related factors that negatively impacts teachers' ability to effectively do their jobs.

Self-efficacy- the belief of a teacher's own ability to succeed in school related situations.

Turnover- Teacher leaving a job and being replaced by a teacher new to the school.

Literature Review**Education in Lummi**

Formal education has not been part of the Lummi Nation's culture for most of its existence. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, European settlers moved to the Pacific Northwest and brought along the expectation of sending all children to school (Hayes, 1990). By the mid 1900s, most American Indian children were sent to boarding schools. The nearest boarding school to the Lummi reservation was about 75 miles away (Hayes, 1990). The alternative to going to boarding school was to attend a local public school where American Indian students encountered extreme racism. Marker (1997) reported that in the 1960s a teacher at the local public school washed an American Indian girl's mouth out with soap, and in a another instance a different teacher kicked an American Indian student; nothing was done about either situation.

Many American Indian students refused to go to the public school and once they completed fifth grade, they dropped out of school. Less than 25% of Lummis were graduating from high school (Hayes, 1990; Marker, 1997). The tribe recognized that they needed their own middle and high school but they could not get the funding needed from the government to keep a school open. In the early 1980s the tribe partnered with the Bureau of Indian Education to open Lummi Tribal School (Hayes, 1990). This school is still open today and is known as Lummi Nation School.

Tribal schools were created so that the culture, language, and American Indian identity could be taught to the younger generations (Tippeconnic & Tippeconnic-Fox, 2012). For many years, education was seen as the enemy as non-tribal schools stripped American Indians of their identity, trying to force them into being who others wanted them to be. This was first done through boarding schools and continues to be done by teachers who do not understand the values of a tribe's culture (Hayes, 1990; Tippeconnic & Tippeconnic-Fox, 2012). Teachers of the same race as their students are often more effective in being culturally relevant and in being able to understand the different needs students may present (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Hayes, 1990). However, finding highly qualified American Indian teachers has been a struggle since the opening of LNS (Hayes, 1990).

Teachers have personal beliefs about how their classrooms should operate. The beliefs of a teacher are shaped by his personal experiences within his own culture. When a teacher steps into a culture that is not his own and carries in his culturally-shaped expectations, there is the potential for conflict within the classroom. Within the Lummi culture, children are given a high level of independence. This level of independence is not a cultural expectation of non-American Indian teachers and, therefore, there is often conflict between these teachers and Lummi students (Hayes, 1990).

Job Stress

Teacher attrition rates for teachers who work in schools that have low-achieving, poor, and minority students are higher than those who teach a high achieving population (Borman & Dowling, 2008). Part of the reason why the attrition rates are higher is because of the high levels of stress that teachers have to cope with. Research studies show that some of the top stressors for teachers are student discipline, workload, class size, inadequate planning time, and a lack of administrative support (Certo & Fox, 2002; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). Of the given stressors, it is cited that student behaviors and discipline are the top stressors (Certo & Fox, 2002). Another factor that negatively contributes to teachers' job satisfaction is low salary and poor benefits. Many teachers feel that they are not paid adequately for the level of degree they hold and the amount of hours they put in each week (Certo & Fox, 2002).

Teachers at LNS deal with many stress factors. Teacher at LNS are paid approximately \$9000 less than their local public school counterparts and receive very few retirement benefits. NCES reported that 61% of teachers who teach in BIE schools feel like their teaching is interrupted because of student misbehaviors (Coopersmith, 2009). In addition, achievement levels are very low at LNS. In the spring of 2015, 22 LNS 11th grade students participated in the Smarter Balanced English-Language Arts testing. Four out of the 22 were at the basic level of meeting the grade level standards; 13 students were at the well below level (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015). With high statistics for student disruptions and low-achieving students, teachers will not typically stay at the school for a long period of time.

Job Satisfaction

Another key factor that contributes to teacher turnover is the teacher's sense of job satisfaction. Every teacher experiences stress; however, it is the level of job satisfaction that

allows the teacher to resist burnout. Job stress and self-efficacy contribute to a teacher's sense of job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2012). Some of the main contributors of job satisfaction are external support, administrative support, level of commitment to the job, and motivation (Collie et al., 2012; Erickson et al., 2008). Job satisfaction is also heavily influenced by workplace conditions. Teachers with a high level of job satisfaction feel like they have a manageable workload, supportive colleagues, administrative support, a good relationship with students, and a voice in decisions (Certo & Fox, 2002). Erickson et al., (2008) reported that teachers in Montana who worked at schools with a predominant American Indian enrollment had the lowest scores reported on the Quality of Teacher Work Life Survey (QTWLS) when compared to the survey results at public schools. The QTWLS was broken down into two different categories: job satisfaction and job stress. Teachers who worked in American Indian schools had such low scores on the QTWLS because they did not experience high levels of job satisfaction; the dominating stressors were not balanced by job satisfaction (Erickson et al., 2008).

Despite adverse conditions that schools may present, some teachers stay because of high levels of job satisfaction. Teachers can find great satisfaction in their job despite the stress it brings. Teachers will stay because of a desire to improve the educational opportunities for students of a minority group. For others, seeing students make progress and having supportive colleagues will motivate teachers to stay (Achinstein et al., 2010). Ultimately, teachers who teach in conditions that present a high level of job stressors will be more likely to stay teaching at the given school if they have a strong sense of commitment to their job, a strong relationship with administration, and healthy relationships with colleagues (Certo & Fox, 2002). Without support, strong relationships, and commitment, the stressors will win out and the teachers will either burnout and quit teaching or will find a different school at which to teach.

Summary

In summary, formal education had not always been a priority to all Lummi tribe members and a history of experienced discrimination has marred their past educational experiences. The tribe opened LNS in effort to change the education culture. Statistics show that at present, LNS is a low-achieving school. Research also shows that teachers who are at low-achieving schools and deal with high levels of job stress are likely to leave the school that they are teaching at or leave the teaching profession entirely. LNS is a school that has many negative factors contributing to high turnover rates: student discipline, low salary, heavy work load, and teaching students of a different culture.

Methods

This was a phenomenological study of the general education, middle and high school teachers of LNS. The concept of doing phenomenological studies is to better understand the experiences of an individual through their lived experiences (Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). This research study was done by interviewing the teachers and then analyzing their responses to discover job stress and job satisfaction. Conducting a survey would have only revealed a limited view of the teachers' experiences, while allowing teachers to orally share their experiences ensured a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Through sharing experiences, the participants' voices were heard and participants discovered shared aspects of the experiences. Sharing experiences through stories is also part of the Lummi tradition and doing a phenomenological study allowed the study to fit into the culture of the tribe.

Participants

The selection of the participants was a purposeful selection. There are sixteen teachers at LNS for grades 7-12. Teachers who had not taught exclusively middle and high school classes at

LNS for at least one full year were not interviewed. This excluded one teacher. Four of the sixteen teachers were special education teachers; most studies were done specifically relating to general or special education teachers so they too were excluded. The researcher was also part of the sixteen and was excluded from the research; the remaining ten teachers were invited to participate in the study.

Of the ten teachers who were invited to participate in the study, eight teachers chose to participate. Four of the teachers had taught at LNS for over ten years; of the four, two were female and two were male. The other four teachers taught at LNS for less than five years but at least two years; all four of those participants were female. One of the eight teachers was Lummi and the remaining seven were Caucasian. All participating teachers had teaching experience prior to working at LNS.

Procedures

The design of the study was a qualitative, phenomenological study. Each participant was asked the same non-leading questions. Because of the busy schedules of the teachers, and because the researcher did not desire to add extra stress to the participants, the teachers were given a copy of the questions at least two days before the interview took place. In each interview, the participants were asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A).

Each interview was voiced recorded and then transcribed to better be able to identify themes. To ensure an ethical study, each participant was given an informed consent agreement to sign (see Appendix B). Also to ensure an ethical study, the participants were asked to member check the results of the findings. One of the concerns of the study was that the researcher was a colleague of the participants. When interviewing the participants, the participant could assume certain ideas and not mention them because of previous conversations or experiences that the

participant and researcher shared together, but those conversations were off the record. Also, because the researcher was a colleague, the study participants knew that they shared many of the same experiences, so they may not have gone into detail about different everyday experiences.

The process of member checking addressed both concerns.

Data Analysis

After all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the interviews were separated into teachers that had taught at Lummi for less than five years and those who had been there longer than ten. They were read as separate groups and then as a whole to selectively code the data. From the coding, the researcher was able to identify themes that suggested job stresses and job satisfaction. The researcher also examined the differences between the teachers who had been teaching at Lummi for more than ten years in comparison to those who have taught at Lummi for less than five.

Results

For the purpose of anonymity, the first group (the teachers who taught at LNS for less than five years) were identified in this study using names that begin with A, B, C and D: Ana, Betty, Carol, and Diane. The second group (the teachers who taught at LNS for more than ten years) were identified in this study using names that begin with E, F, G, and H: Ed, Fran, Gaby, and Hugh.

Job Stressors

Student behaviors. All of the participants revealed that one of the main stressors was management of the challenging behaviors that the students presented. Some of the behaviors that were mentioned were students swearing at teachers, walking out of class, refusing to work,

ignoring directions, and talking back. When talking about students being overtly disrespectful and rude, Diane shared,

My first couple of months of my first year was the roughest teaching job I've ever had and the first time I had ever considered quitting mid-year, which is something I would never normally do. It wasn't until late January when I decided that I wanted to stay because it took that long to feel successful. (Diane's interview, 2-9-16)

Along with managing the student behaviors, multiple teachers from both groups mentioned that students very rarely took responsibility for their own actions. Carol shared that students claim "it is always someone else's fault" (Carol's interview, 2-4-16). The teachers lamented that because students did not recognize the wrong in their actions, they found no reason to change their behaviors, and so the behaviors continued without positive change. "The students don't realize that their behavior could get them fired at a job; like being late, insubordinate, and talking back" (Fran's interview, 1-29-16).

Another stressor related to the students, identified by both groups, was the reality that "generally students academically and behaviorally are at least two years behind what we would see in the mainstream" (Ed's interview, 1-27-16). The teachers believed that one of the reasons students were behind was because of truancy. The teachers stated that when students did not come to school, the teachers bore the responsibility of making sure the student got caught up. When the students were in school, many of them were so far behind and therefore presented behavior issues. "It is a constant battle to keep kids on task, motivated, and doing what they're supposed to be doing" (Betty's interview, 1-27-16).

The teachers also recognized that students were low academically and behaviorally because many of the students came from rough home environments. They shared how students

often were changing where they lived and with whom they lived because many parents are no longer in their lives. Carol shared that whenever she needed to have a student get a form signed she had to ask with whom the students were living at the time because the students frequently “couch surfed.”

You don’t say your mom or your dad, whenever you want something done or taken care of or signed, it’s whoever you stay with or whoever is in charge of you. In other schools it’s your mom and dad or your parents or guardian. Here is just different that way.

(Carol’s interview, 2-4-16)

The teachers recognized that without anyone teaching the students life and academic skills at home, the students were completely dependent on learning all skills at school. While the teachers talked about this with deep compassion, it was recognized as a challenging factor.

Teachers recognized that the hardships students carried from home life impacted the relationships they had with the students. The teachers were constantly playing a variety of different roles when interacting with the students. One of the roles that was mentioned most frequently was being a listening ear and in many ways a counselor to the students:

They have such hard lives. I think that we (the staff) show them what normal is. I think we show them what it’s like to not have parents and siblings and grandparents who aren’t in prison. I think they get the best of us. (Carol’s interview, 2-4-16).

The consistency of having to play counselor (among many other roles) drained the teachers. “It (the job) consumes you emotionally. I’d like to be freer to pursue other things, but the job is draining. It requires sleep and time alone to balance it out” (Gaby’s interview, 1-29-16).

Administration. Adding to the stress of student behaviors was the lack of communication and, at times, the lack of support from administration. All of the teachers who

taught at Lummi over ten years cited the high level of turnover in administration. “The teachers tend to run things by themselves as we’ve had lots of administrations, so there have been opportunities for staff to basically just run things at the school” (Hugh’s interview, 2-12-16). The teachers shared that they liked having freedom but they felt the weight of it. One teacher mentioned that with such a high amount of turnover in administration that discipline policies were never instituted leaving the discipline to fall on the shoulders of the teachers. She also mentioned that at times administration was just not present. “I would say right now the teachers are who are really keeping this school going at a high level because of the absenteeism in admin” (Gaby’s interview, 1-29-16).

Another lack of support from administration that the teachers noted was a lack of direction in the curricular area. The teachers who taught at LNS for less than five years mentioned the concern for the lack of administrative leadership for new teachers to LNS:

I came into this job and was not told anything at all about what I was supposed to do, what I was expected to do, what would be a good thing to do, what would be a bad things to do, how much money I had to spend, how much money I didn’t have to spend. I wasn’t told a thing. (Ana’s interview, 1-27-16)

The newer teachers mentioned that when they came, they were left to figure things out on their own. They felt like they were nuisances and credit their colleagues for helping them figure things out. “There is no central person to go to for help. There is a lack of cohesive administration” (Betty’s interview, 1-27-16).

Additionally, the teachers from both groups felt that administration did not acknowledge their work. “There isn’t much administrative acknowledgement or any acknowledgement for a job well done across the board unless you get it from your colleagues or from the students”

(Gaby's interview, 1-29-16). While the teachers noted that they did not need accolades, a "thank you" or "well done" every once in a while would be appreciated. One teacher observed that the lack of administrative presence was alarming in that the administration really did not know what was happening in the classrooms. "If I was not an ethical and good teacher it would be concerning because there is almost no accountability" (Diane's interview, 2-9-16).

The teachers who taught at LNS for over ten years shared that the present administration had brought a lot of stability to the school. A couple teachers mentioned that they could not remember the last time a fight broke out in school. The present administration had set expectations for students in the general behavior and there had been positive growth; however, all teacher participants mentioned that the lack of administrative support was felt.

Lack of resources. Another challenge that many of the teachers from both groups described was having to write their own curriculum and not being given adequate time and resources to do it. Diane shared that on a number of occasions she learned she was teaching a new class the day before the class started and there was no curriculum to support the class. She was not compensated with an extra prep period or monetarily for all the extra time spent creating the curriculum; she was just expected to do it (Carol's interview, 2-9-16). Carol shared that she did not have a scope or sequence for her classes, she just taught and hoped she was doing a good job (Carol's interview, 2-4-16). Fran stated, "I felt really overloaded with work. I had four different preps and no materials for any of them. They were all so different that I felt that I couldn't really do my job as well as I wanted" (Fran's interview, 1-29-16).

The science teachers, one who has been teaching at LNS for over ten years and the other less than five, shared that they were supposed to teach lab sciences but they had a completely non-functional lab. Along a non-functional lab, they did not have discretionary funds to be able

to do a spur-of-the-moment project. The science teachers, along with other teachers, mentioned that they had to pay out of pocket for classroom materials at LNS more than they had at any other school.

In the challenge of inadequate resources, technology was also highlighted as a problem. The teachers who had been at LNS for less than five years shared that they were expected to use certain technology and yet their SMART boards had been broken for over a year. Some of their document cameras were also broken and had not been fixed. The teachers who had been at LNS for more than ten years expressed that they were expected to incorporate iPads into their curriculum but they did not feel equipped to do that because of lack of familiarity with technology.

Job Satisfaction

Making a difference. All of the participating teachers voiced that despite the demands of the job, they felt like they were exactly where they need to be. They felt like they were doing good in the world by doing good work in their job. “This job is rewarding like in the way that I feel like I’m doing work that I feel like I’m good at...I feel like my strengths lie in helping at risk or low achieving kids” (Betty’s interview, 1-27-16). Ed shared that he enjoyed watching the school evolve. “The very first year going into the second year we saw progress, we saw opportunity. It was too good of a game to walk away from and it has been ever since” (Ed’s interview, 1-27-16). Carol took great pride in the fact that despite everything, her students passed the state standardized tests (interview, 2-4-16).

The Christian teachers shared that they felt like LNS was where God called them to be. “I truly believe that the gifts God has given me as a teacher are God-given gifts. I believe that I am filled with the Spirit of God and that He put me in this place” (Ana’s interview, 1-27-16). Diane

joked that she never saw herself doing ministry but now she had a different perspective: “I truly feel like this is ministry, a fun ministry that I want to do” (Diane’s interview, 2-9-16).

Building student relationships. When the teachers were asked why they returned to LNS, overall the response was because they genuinely loved the students. Diane reflected on how teaching at LNS has been the toughest job she has ever had but she was so thankful for it: “this job has become very fruitful and the most rewarding one I’ve ever had. The fruit, once you get it, is undeniable and amazing” (Diane’s interview, 2-9-16).

The teachers from both groups recognized the importance of time in building relationships but that culture was a barrier. The Caucasian teachers acknowledged the fact that their upbringing was completely different than their students’; however, after time the cultural differences seemed to disappear. “As they see me less as a white person and more as a teacher, I am coming to see them be more themselves and be able to appreciate them for who they are” (Ana’s interview, 1-27-16).

The teachers from both groups recognized that the students needed dependable adults in their lives and the teachers felt honored to fill that role for the students. The teachers who had been at LNS for over ten years recognized the need from a broader perspective. Hugh shared that having positive relationships with the students had not always been a reality:

The students take school more seriously now and leave some of the family fights, personal fights outside of the school, and leave this as a protected space. I think part of that is due to the staff and their hard work at protecting this as a safe place to be. I think the strength of the staff to picture that and to carry it out, the will of that has really helped. The kids over time, I think, have respected that more and more. (Hugh’s interview, 2-12-16)

The veteran teachers also shared the importance of knowing the community. “It’s all about relationships. You have to become one of the community of people here” (Ed’s interview, 1-27-16). They spoke fondly of the community and of past students, how they enjoyed having students come back and visit. “I take pride in the fact that a lot of the kids see me as a person that they can get along with and work with in terms of being nice to them and being supportive of them in the things they’re doing” (Hugh’s interview, 2-12-16). Fran shared that she felt at home at LNS because she had come to know the students, their parents, and their grandparents (Fran’s interview 1-29-16).

Staff relationships. All of the teacher participants shared how much they enjoyed working with the team of teachers that was at LNS. They recognized the fact that because they were working with such high needs students, they depended on their colleagues more than they had at any other job. The teachers who had been at LNS for less than five years especially emphasized their gratitude and need for their colleagues to continue being successful in their jobs. “The staff is the best I’ve ever worked with....I honestly think that is the best part about this job that we support each other in every single facet of teaching here” (Carol’s interview, 2-4-16). From the same group, Diane also acknowledged that without the support the other teachers provided, she would not have survived at LNS:

I’ve never had as supportive and flexible and laid back coworkers, the teachers, as I’ve had here. If you guys were not open and humble about your struggles, I would clearly have thought I was the only one who had struggles and had students behaving a certain way, and that would have killed me. (Diane’s interview, 2-9-16)

Teaching at LNS was different than teaching anywhere else in the county. The teachers voiced that as a fact and multiple teachers mentioned that people who did not work at LNS did not understand the daily struggles that the LNS teachers had each day:

If teachers didn't work well together, if we didn't support each other that would definitely push me away from this job. This is the best staff I've ever worked on...the staff keeps me sane. Teachers from other schools do not understand our day here.

(Betty's interview, 1-27-2016)

The teachers who taught at Lummi longer than ten years also acknowledged that they never would have been able to stay as long as they did without the support of their fellow teachers. They shared that it was absolute survival when the school first started, so they needed each other. Gaby noted that she had seen an improvement in the staff lately: "I've seen a nice shift in the past two years with teachers who get along as colleagues and are interested in keeping the bar high for themselves and for their students and who really seem to enjoy each other" (Gaby's interview 1-29-16).

Freedom. One of the reasons a few of the teachers from both groups gave for staying teaching at LNS was because they appreciated the lack of micromanaging. "I won't go back to people breathing down my neck and ridiculous, pointless meetings" (Diane's interview, 2-9-16). The teachers voiced that handling student discipline and staying on top of everything else took up a lot of their time, so they were thankful that they did not have administrators meddling in the small things.

For some teachers, writing their own curriculum was stressful; for others, it was an enjoyable opportunity. Ana shared that she loved being "able to design my own curriculum" (Ana's interview, 1-27-16). Carol shared that she enjoyed being able to teach whatever she

wanted and she appreciated that she got to purchase her own classroom supplies each year (Carol's interview, 2-4-16). Ed also shared that he truly enjoyed being able to create learning opportunities that were fun for both him and his students. He felt that in other schools he would not have had that same freedom and trust, and that his curriculum would have been more standardized (Ed's interview, 1-27-16). The teachers recognized that with the freedom they were better able to differentiate for the needs of the students.

Growth as a teacher. In both teacher groups, all teachers recognized that they were better teachers because of having taught at LNS. With such a diverse population of learners and abilities, the teachers explained that they were very effective in differentiating. Knowing how to differentiate so effectively allowed the teachers to feel successful in their jobs. Hugh commented that he "learned to create a lot more opportunities for kids to try to succeed at their level" (Hugh's interview, 2-12-16). Diane shared that teaching at LNS had been the best learning opportunity that she ever had in becoming an effective teacher to all types of students (Diane's interview, 2-9-16). Gaby realized that she was more sympathetic towards the students who struggle: "I am a much better teacher of the struggling student spectrum...I think its given me more of an appreciation for students who struggle and the many reasons why they struggle" (Gaby's interview, 1-29-16).

The teachers also recognized that because they had to scaffold the learning in so many different ways, they were better teachers in their content area:

I feel like I could go anywhere and teach because I've really, really had to learn the material in order to be able to teach it at so many different levels and in order to find so many different ways to explain it. (Betty's interview, 1-27-16)

Not only were the teachers better at teaching in their content area, they did it in a way that was very conscious of biases towards American Indians and other races. The teachers pointed out that the students are quick to jump in with racist comments, so they had to learn how to be sensitive in that manner.

The teachers also felt like they could handle any type of behavior that was thrown their way. The teachers took pride in their thick skin, their ability to forgive and move on, their flexibility, and their ability to deescalate situations. They knew that each teacher at LNS needed to possess those attributes and each year they recognized that they had grown in those attributes.

Growth as a person. Working in a population that possessed so much hurt and brokenness challenged each teacher as an individual. Each teacher shared they felt like they were more compassionate and empathetic than when they started teaching at LNS.

I was not a teacher before I came here and probably don't consider myself to be much of a human being until I came here. I'm dealing with trauma constantly. I'm seeing people in pain. I'm seeing the raw edge of human existence, so I've had to learn to throw away my prejudices. I've had to learn to be much more empathetic. I've had to learn to be much more thoughtful about everything in life because it's not wrapped in a bow. (Ed's interview, 1-27-16)

The teachers shared that they were daily challenged to leave their own problems at home and give all they had to help the students through theirs. Gaby shared: "This job has made me a much better teacher and human being because you work with kids that come from really intense backgrounds and are really struggling. You appreciate the survivor quality in all the kids (Gaby's interview, 1-29-16).

The Christian teachers also embraced the work that God did through them and in them while teaching at LNS:

I look at what the Lord is trying to teach me here and I know it is exactly where I need to be, but I also know that a lot of those lessons are painful and not lessons I want to learn but God wants me to learn them even though I don't want to. (Ana's interview, 1-27-16)

Betty shared that she has learned that there is only so much that she can do for her students; the greatest thing she can offer to her students is to pray for them (interview, 1-27-16). And finally Diane has seen God's love grow in her each day:

I really believe attitude is everything and I've always believed that love wins, but I've never seen it proved out so often and so obviously as it does here, because where there is the most hurt it needs the most love. (Diane's interview, 2-9-16)

Rigor vs. Cultural Integration

A resounding difference that was voiced in comparing the teachers who taught less than five years to those who had been there longer than ten was the differing priorities of cultural relevancy and rigor in the classroom. The teachers who had been there longer shared a lot about the importance of cultural relevancy and how the school used to do a better job of bringing in elders from the community to talk to the students. Culture classes were still being taught but they were isolated. Along with integrating culture into the classroom, these teachers talked about rigor and how LNS had become more standardized. "I've seen the school grow and change more toward the mode or model of a standardized public school and leaving behind many of the practices that we applied in the past and losing the cultural emphasis" (Ed's interview, 1-27-16). Hugh wondered if the school should have reevaluated their practices:

I think the experience in native schools has got to be looked at from taking kids from

where they are and moving them along a pathway and not continually trying to judge them to a standard that is going to be way beyond where they can achieve. (Hugh's interview, 2-12-16)

The teachers who had taught less than five years talked about the importance of increasing the rigor at the school. They talked about how they were helping kids pass the state's requirements to graduate. Betty shared that she had sensed more of a drive towards rigor in the school. She knew that in the past the school had become a diploma mill and that was changing. She voiced concern in the change wondering how the community responded:

I hope that we can survive that lag time before the community is on board and realizes these kids need to come to school, they need to work, they need to be responsible, they need to get their work done because they will not be graduating otherwise. (Betty's interview, 1-27-2016)

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to discover what the main job stressors for the teachers at LNS were and what aspects of job satisfaction kept teachers at LNS at the school. Research studies show that some of the top stressors for teachers are student discipline, workload, class size, inadequate planning time, and a lack of administrative support (Certo & Fox, 2002; Collie, et al., 2012). The teachers at LNS revealed all of those stressors except for class size.

Job stress causes many teachers to leave their teaching jobs, but at LNS, a group of teachers did not leave despite the job stressors. The reason that teachers stayed at LNS was that despite all the stressors, they loved their jobs. Research stated that one of the top reasons that teacher will stay in their job was because of supportive colleagues (Achinstein et al., 2010; Certo & Fox, 2002). The respect and appreciation that each teacher at LNS demonstrated when talking

about their colleagues was quite clear. They knew that without their colleagues they would burn out and most likely would have quit their job. The teachers in this study shared that when they were having a rough day, a colleague almost always came to check on them. Working at LNS gave teachers a sense of supportive community like they had never felt before. In this area, LNS teachers are consistent with the research studies that suggested having supportive colleagues was key to staying in a high stress job.

Another noted aspect of job satisfaction was commitment to the profession (Certo & Fox, 2002). Commitment to the profession for the LNS teachers meant commitment to the students and helping them through their life journey. The teachers at LNS have a deep commitment to their subject area but an even deeper commitment to the students. They demonstrate a commitment to the good of mankind and a desire to see young men and women, who have very little going for them, be successful. The teachers want to help their students be the first ones to graduate in their family. The teachers want to help their students stay out of legal trouble and to give them a sense of worth and belonging. The teachers want their students to know that when it felt like no one is there supporting them, that the teachers would do whatever they could to help the student. This illustrates that despite the behavior issues that students present, the teachers are still committed to the students proving that job satisfaction is more important than job stress.

Teachers want to feel successful in their job. The teachers at LNS demonstrated that success could look different in each school. The teachers revealed that success for them was watching students grow and evolve and being proud of their growth even if it was not at the same standard as other students their age. The teachers who have stayed were able to redefine what being successful meant and were able to be content with that new standard.

The study also sought to identify the differences between teachers who had taught at LNS less than five years compared to those who had been at LNS over ten years. The teachers from the second group voiced their concern that the emphasis on rigor pushed out some of the cultural integration that used to be present at LNS. The teacher participants from this group shared that the shift to an increase in rigor has been present for over ten years. They have watched the school become more and more standardized causing culture to be pushed out. The teachers from the first group only know the school with a priority placed more on heavily rigor and culture at times losing its priority. Without an understanding of the importance of cultural relevancy, the teachers may not be able to effectively manage of stress of being rigorous in a high needs school.

Summary

The teachers clearly voiced that there were many challenging factors in teaching at LNS. Job stress is what leads to job burnout, and job burnout is what leads to teacher attrition. Over the years, LNS has seen a lot of teacher attrition; however, there were a handful of teachers that stayed for a long period of time despite the high demands of the job. These teachers experienced high levels of job stress, but also high levels of job satisfaction. Ultimately for these teachers, the levels of job satisfaction were higher than the levels of job stress. The key to finding a high level of job satisfaction was being able to focus on the good that the teachers were doing and not let the negative experiences stand in their way. Another important factor is knowing the culture and understanding the expectations of education within the tribe.

Implications

When comparing quality of life for teachers who worked primarily with American Indians to teachers who worked primarily with Caucasian students, research studies found that the teachers who teach American Indians had a much lower quality of life score (Erickson et al.,

2008). One suggestion offered by the Erickson et al. (2008) study was to offer a means for teachers to become sensitized to the differences before they begin their work at the school. In the sensitizing classes, the teachers would be educated about differences they may find teaching in a school with predominately American Indians (Erickson et al., 2008). The teachers who taught at LNS for over ten years shared that to be successful at LNS, it was important to know and understand the culture of the community. When the school first started in the 1980s, it was better at holistically incorporating American Indian culture into the school day. Over the years, the emphasis shifted to being more focused on academics and this has brought more stress to an already stressful job. LNS would benefit if offered cultural classes to teachers before they began their work at LNS. Teachers need to be well aware of the history of the school, the present culture of the school, and the vision of the school for the future. The teachers also need to be aware of the present climate of the tribe and the community. The stresses of teaching at a school with American Indians has proven to be different and teachers need to be aware so they are better equipped to manage the stress.

Not just any teacher was able to stay teaching at LNS. The teachers who were able to stay revealed that they dealt with a great amount of job stress, but they also experienced a great amount of job satisfaction. The teachers who were able to stay for more than ten years demonstrated a deep respect and understanding for the culture of the Lummi tribe; and now, with this knowledge, they have successfully adapted to the demands of the job. The teachers who have taught at LNS for less than five year demonstrated a respect but lack of understanding for the Lummi culture. Because the American Indian culture is vastly different than the culture that the teachers grew up in, without an intimate knowledge of the American Indian culture, the teachers may be more likely to leave their jobs.

Public education was forced in the American Indian tribes. Tippeconnic and Tippeconnic-Fox (2012) stated: “the No Child Left Behind Act pushed tribal languages and cultures out of schools because of the national emphasis on reading, math, and science” (p. 842). LNS fell prey to the very reality Tippeconnic and Tippeconnic-Fox spoke of. LNS would benefit from joining with tribal leaders to create cultural goals as well as reasonable academic goals for the school. Tribal colleges and universities have developed a system to integrate culture based on community needs and LNS could follow this model (Tippeconnic & Tippeconnic-Fox, 2012). Tribal colleges and universities accomplish integrating tribal values in their schools by being “chartered by tribes and governed by American Indian boards of trustees” (Tippeconnic & Tippeconnic-Fox, 2012, p. 845). The colleges and universities also utilize the elders of the tribes to share the values and knowledge with not only the students but also with the faculty and staff (Tippeconnic & Tippeconnic-Fox, 2012).

Limitations

A noted limitation of the study was that the researcher was teaching at LNS at the time of the study. Her personal experience allowed her to shed light into aspects of the study, but also caused a personal bias throughout the study. While the researcher had her own thoughts on job stress and job satisfaction, the information that was presented in the study was strictly from the interviews and the research literature. She utilized member checking to ensure that the findings were accurate.

Another limitation of the study was that teachers who had left LNS were not interviewed. The study discovered why teachers stayed, but with half of the teachers had less than five years of teaching at LNS, the school has experienced a high level of teacher attrition. The teachers who left could provide valuable insight on job stress factors or job dissatisfactions that caused them to

leave their jobs. Administration could use this information to address the negative factors and retain more teachers.

This study was very specific to a small, tribal school which limits its impact. The findings could be used for schools of any ethnicity that have teachers who are from a different culture than their students. The findings could also be applied to schools who serve a high needs population.

For future studies, it is recommended that researchers interview teachers who left the school along with teachers who stayed at the school. The research could reveal how teachers who stayed were able to cope with the negative factors that caused other teachers to leave. The researchers could otherwise find that job stress or job dissatisfaction did not play a role in the teacher attrition.

Another recommendation is to have a neutral or non-staff member conduct the research on LNS teacher attrition. This would ensure that no personal bias is incorporated throughout the study. The participants also may expand more on their experiences to ensure the researcher fully understands what the teachers experience each day.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you describe how your experience has been at LNS?
2. How have you seen the LNS grow and change? (climate, students, teachers)
3. How do you feel like you have professionally grown while teaching at LNS?
4. How do you feel like you have personally grown while at LNS?
5. What have been some of the more challenging factors teaching at LNS?
6. What are keys to being a successful teacher at LNS?
7. Why do you return each year to teach at LNS?

Appendix B**Informed Consent Form****A Phenomenological Study of 7th-12th Grade Teachers at Lummi Nation School**

Researcher: Cara Mulder

Information and Purpose: The interview, for which you are being asked to participate in, is a part of a research study that is focused on examining the experiences of 7th-12th grade general education teachers at Lummi Nation School. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of what it takes to retain teachers at Lummi Nation School.

Your Participation: Your participation in this study will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your teaching experience at Lummi Nation School. At any time you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study.

Benefits and Risks: The benefit of your participation in this study will be the contribution of information to the school community about being a successful teacher in this unique environment. The findings of the study may benefit you, incoming teachers, and present colleagues. There are no known risks associated with participating in the study.

Confidentiality: The interview will be voice recorded and then transcribed. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. The information obtain from the interview will be published as part of the researcher's action research project, but will be presented as aggregate data.

If you have any questions, please call me, Cara Mulder, at ext. 4425 or (360) 389-0013. You can also email me at cara.mulder@lummi-k12.org. If you have any additional questions you can call my thesis advisor, Dr. Patricia Kornelis, at (712) 722-6325.

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I am aware that the experiences I share may be used in the written research while maintaining my anonymity. Your signature below indicates that you have decided to participate.

Signature_____ Date_____